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"I wanted to prove I had a brain ... and give my life a purpose" - Preliminary analysis of survey responses of former Open Foundation students on their lives before, during and after completing the program

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A survey of past students was undertaken as part of my PhD on the history and impacts of Newcastle University's Open Foundation program. Requirements for admission to Open Foundation are simply that students are permanent residents of Australia turning twenty years of age in the year of enrolment. The survey, drawn from a register named Potential Enabling Program Participant Research, elicited 340 responses from students who had been enrolled. It asked them why they enrolled, their experience of study while completing the program and what had become of them after completion. Demographic data included sex, country of birth, whether they identified as an Indigenous Australian, whether they had a disability, year of enrolment, subjects selected and career path or destination at the end of their studies. Several short answer qualitative questions were posed such as why they enrolled, whether participating in the program had changed their life in any way, and if so, how? This paper provides some interesting insights into the reasons people sought to change their circumstances and where the challenge of mature age study has led them.

Part of my PhD research into the history and impacts of the Open Foundation Program (OFP) entailed a survey of 340 former students who were sourced from the Potential Enabling Program Recipient Research (PEPPR) register. The PEPPR register was an initiative of the University of Newcastle which aimed to provide a pool of respondents from Enabling programs, initially as far back as 1995, who might agree to participate in research that would provide a research agenda on enabling education. At the time of survey the register had 830 Open Foundation (OF) participants who it was hoped would contribute to evidence of the outcomes of enabling programs, particularly as they form a major educational pathway for people from low SES backgrounds. Besides some demographic data, former OF students were asked about their experiences before, during and after completing the program in order to consider their motivation to enrol and where their educational journey had taken them thus far. This paper presents some preliminary findings on that data which will be further analysed in the near future with NVivo software to draw out comparative data and a more nuanced approach to the research.

It is quite telling that a large number of the surveys were returned the very first day it was possible for them to pass back through the postal system. One of my supervisors remarked that it was as if these people were "busting to tell their stories". This

eagerness to communicate about the OF speaks to its impact on their lives. Some had little post-it notes on them with messages of appreciation, and one envelope was filled with confetti like shapes that sprinkled across my desk upon opening it. Some of the responses were quite moving, sad beginnings that ended in triumph, pride in their achievements, or for those who had not completed, recognition that Open Foundation had been a worthwhile experience. Only one reported a negative experience and that was due to a clash and possible misunderstanding with a lecturer, not with the program itself.

Methodology

The survey contained both quantitative and qualitative questions in order to elicit demographic data but also to probe more detailed responses about students' reasons for enrolling in the course, their experience of the course, whether it had changed their lives in any way as well as what had become of them after completion. The response rate to the survey was roughly 41% which is considered adequate given that no follow-up or reminders were possible. De Vaus (1995, p.119) suggests two or three follow ups are ideal to achieve higher response rates. It should be borne in mind that this was a self-selected sample which cannot claim to be representative of all students who have completed OF. As Walter (2006:191) points out, such data must be viewed as subjective and can be influenced by what respondents think the project organisers may wish to hear. Nevertheless, the surveys provided insights into sex, age at entry, cultural backgrounds, whether people identified as Indigenous or having a disability and provided details about their journey and current destination.

Demographic data

Of the respondents, 78.5% were female (n=267) and 21.5% were male (n=73). Overwhelmingly the respondents were Australian born (86.76%) with the remainder (13.25%) coming from a variety of different countries:

Respondents were not asked whether English was their second language, but country of birth gives some indication of the potential difficulties some students may encounter when they have the additional burden of having to learn and negotiate another language.

The majority of students 87% (n=305) indicated they did not have a disability, while 13% (n=35) indicated that they did. This suggests that a proportion of respondents were able to engage with their studies despite some form of restriction which had to be factored into their capacity to complete. One respondent, for example, had Muscular Dystrophy and was confined to a wheelchair which also meant that she could not access the lecture theatre as easily as other students and after arriving at the University in a disabled taxi, had to take a circuitous route, far longer than other students, struggle to open the rear door of the lecture theatre and then position her wheelchair in the back row. Her condition was such that she was often unable to physically hold a book to read and she needed significant parental support. In addition, she was a single parent whose determination to succeed was to set an example for her son and show him that education was something to be valued. The percentage of students identifying as having a disability may also be underreported due to the fact that increasingly, students with mental illnesses are enrolling in the program. Interview data from a Disability Officer

indicated that 35% of clients at the Disability service are now presenting with mental illnesses.

Table 1: Country of birth of Open Foundation students

Country	Number	Percentage	Country	Number	Percentage
Australia	**295**	**86.76%**	**Central Asia**		
New Zealand	**8**	**2.35%**	Turkmenistan	1	
UK (unspecified)	3		TOTAL	**1**	**0.3%**
England	10		**Asia**		
Scotland	6		Vietnam	1	
Wales	1		Thailand	1	
Ireland	1		TOTAL	**2**	**0.6%**
Northern Ireland	1		**South Africa**	**2**	**0.6%**
TOTAL	**22**	**6.5%**	**Pacific**		
Europe			Solomon Islands	1	
Sweden	2		Tonga	1	
Denmark	1		TOTAL	**2**	**0.6%**
Germany	2		**South America**		
Switzerland	1		Panama	1	
Romania	1		TOTAL	**1**	**0.3%**
TOTAL	**7**	**2%**			
			TOTAL	**340**	**100%**

The survey data revealed that 1.47% of respondents (n=5) identified as Indigenous. The average Indigenous enrolment for the University of Newcastle is 1.1% so this suggests that among this sample of enabling students there was a higher proportion of Indigenous students who have specific cultural needs. Data collected from focus groups (Bunn et al 2012) indicated that in the transition to undergraduate studies there was an extra layer of difficulty, a triple transition into undergraduate education, that included learning to cope with the requirements of an enabling program, then a new set of expectations in undergraduate courses as well as meeting cultural expectations or, in some cases, coming to terms with Indigenous identity. If the Enabling programs are the major entry point to undergraduate studies then attention must be paid to the particular needs of these students.

I was also interested in what age these students had been when they enrolled in the course. Anecdotally there was a perception that students in more recent years were increasingly younger, however the survey data did not bear this out:

Table 2: Entry age to Open Foundation

Age	n	Age	n	Age	n	Age	n	Age	n	Age	n
20	18	30	6	40	14	50	9	60	1	70	1
21	10	31	8	41	11	51	3	61	1	71	0
22	7	32	12	42	13	52	6	62	3	72	1
23	1	33	7	43	15	53	3	63	1	73	0
24	9	34	9	44	10	54	6	64	0	74	0
25	8	35	17	45	9	55	2	65	1	75	0
26	7	36	14	46	13	56	3	66	1	76	1

27	5	37	11	47	5	57	1	67	1	77	0
28	5	38	13	48	4	58	4	68	0	78	1
29	9	39	12	49	5	59	2	69	1	79	0
TOTAL	79		109		99		39		10		4
%	23.2%		32.1%		29.1%		11.5%		2.9%		1.2%

This table shows that the most numerous age group to enrol in Open Foundation is the 30-39 year olds who comprised 32.1% of the sample. Of these, the highest number were the 35 year olds (n= 17). The second most numerous group was those aged 40-49 years with 99 (29.1%) which suggests that rather than those who are immediately able to enrol at 20 years, students are more likely to have spent a considerable number of years as parents or in the workforce before enrolling. This corresponds to informants (usually women) who indicated that they enrolled because their children were now at school or had become independent or left home. The younger cohort of 20-29 years who comprised 23.2% or less than one quarter of the sample, were only the third most numerous category. The 50 and over age group numbered 53 or 15.6% of the total sample, some of these respondents indicated they were studying for interest rather than actively pursuing a new career. More detailed analysis of the data through NVivo will reveal these comparative data. Only 4 respondents came from the oldest age category (1.2%) and were mostly retired professionals who now had time to enjoy the lifelong learning that is valued by many.

Table 3: Previous educational qualification

Qualification	Number	Percentage
Year 7	3	0.9%
Year 8	4	1.2%
Year 9	15	4.4%
Year 10 (School Certificate)	139	41%
Year 11	26	7.6%
Year 12 (HSC)	98	28.8%
TAFE	42	12.4%
University	13	3.8%

This data indicates that for this sample more students came to OF with a Year 10 qualification (41%) than any other category. If 47.5% of all these respondents had an education level of School Certificate or less which points to the fact that students' absence from formal education is at least 4 or 5 years and often far longer. Students often commented on their surveys that the time that had elapsed since their previous educational experience was a particular hurdle they had to overcome when re-entering studies. It is also interesting that a number of people came to the course with prior University entry qualifications. In some cases these were professionals who had retired and were looking to expand their interests by studying courses of interest, while others were looking to change career paths and felt it necessary to re-enter the University system to gain entry to their degree of choice.

Former students were also not clustered in particular years of completing Open Foundation, their experiences were drawn from a wide range of years of enrolment. 4.1% had completed from 1974-1994 and had contacted the University to be placed on the PEPPR register in consequence of publicity about it, but the vast majority (n=326 or 95.9%) came directly from the University's initiative to provide a data base of research respondents who enrolled from 1995 onwards:

Table 4: Number of respondents and Year of enrolment between 1995-2011

1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
18	20	17	10	18	16	17	23	15
2004	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	
18	22	23	24	21	27	28	9	

In order to ascertain how students had first encountered the program they were asked to recall how they had heard about it. This information was useful in assessing anecdotal evidence that suggested that family and friends were often influential in both informing prospective students about the course but also in encouraging them to enrol.

Table 5: How students heard about the Open Foundation program

Word of mouth	n=	Media	n=	University	n=	Other Institution	n=
Family	32	Newspaper	58	Uni web	35	TAFE	7
Friends	86	Radio	10	Open Day	8	School	1
Mentor	1	Television	3	Brochure	2	Career Centre	1
Taxi driver	1	Media (not specified)	32	Shopping Centre	6	Centrelink	3
Psychologist	1			Uni (not specified)	31		
Veterinarian	1						
Work	3						
Other (not specified)	17						
TOTAL	**143**		**103**		**82**		**12**
%	**42.1%**		**30.3%**		**24.1%**		**3.5%**

This data suggests that word of mouth was the strongest category and that friends were more likely than family to persuade people about the benefits of the course. These data also indicate that University promotions are also worth the effort as either directly through its website or other initiatives, or indirectly through media advertising, 54.4% of these respondents enrolled in the course through marketing efforts.

Table 6: Did your economic status improve as a result of doing OFP?

Yes	No
155 (45.6%)	**185 (54.4%)**

It is of note that of those students who answered "No" a significant number were still enrolled in degree courses and in the process of completing their studies. Many included an additional note on the survey form to say "Not yet!" so clearly expected that at some time in the future their economic status would improve.

Table 7: No economic improvement after completing Open Foundation

Reasons	Number	Percentage
Still completing a degree	**95**	**51.35%**
Same or lesser paid work	33	17.83%
No further study after OFP	26	14.05%
Discontinued Undergraduate studies	13	7.02%
Retired	7	3.78%
No career after study	6	3.24%
Became a family carer and couldn't continue	3	1.62%
Diagnosed with cancer	2	1.08%
TOTAL	**185**	**100%**

A variety of careers that were undertaken by former students that did bring an improvement to their economic circumstances included: teaching, health, caring professions, management, public service, business, law, information technology, environmental science, research, union organiser, industrial relations, project officer, engineering, veterinarian, immigration agent, hospitality, journalism, pilot, seafarer, artist. It should be noted that some occupation categories overlapped, they were not discrete and data was recorded according to the emphasis indicated by the respondent. For example, they may have identified their career destination as public servant but been involved in welfare work or a manager. There was also a range of miscellaneous career paths identified by a single respondent such as journalist, engineer, pilot, veterinarian, botanical illustrator which were unique to this sample (see Table 8).

Of the students who were still completing degrees13 were competing some kind of teaching degree; 12 were doing Arts degrees; 11 were doing B. Social Science; 11 were doing B. Science (including Environmental and Earth Science); 7 were doing B. Psychology; 5 were doing B. Nursing; 3 were doing B. Speech Pathology and another 3 were doing B. Podiatry. The remainder were undertaking a vast range of other degrees including: Law (n=2); Biomedical Science (n=2); Business (n=2); Communications (n=1); Diagnostic Radiology (n=1); International Studies (n=1); Occupational Health & Safety (n=1); Development Studies (n=1); Economics (n=1); General Studies in Science (n=1); Social Work (n=1); Natural History Illustration (n=1); Commerce (n=1); Visual Communication (n=1); Food Science (n=1); Nutrition & Dietetics (n=1).

In addition, quite a number were doing postgraduate work such as: B.A(Hons) in Egyptology; 2 were doing Masters of Psychology; also a Master of Soc Sci; Master of Astronomy; Master of Tax Law; and the remainder were doing PhDs in Speech

Pathology, History, Commerce, Communications or Architecture. Presumably most of these people were likely to move into professional careers that would enhance their economic status in the future.

Table 8: Careers that did improve economic status

Career	Number	Percentage
Teaching:		
Early Childhood	2	
Special Education	6	
Primary	7	
Secondary	10	
Teaching (not specified)	10	
Adult Education	1	
TAFE	2	
Academic	8	
TOTAL	**46**	**29.7%**
Health:		
Medicine	1	
Biomedical Science	1	
Radiation Therapist	1	
Nursing	11	
Midwifery	2	
Disability/Rehabilitation	1	
Oral Hygienist	1	
Nutrition/Health Promotion	1	
Occupational Health & Safety	1	
Remedial massage	2	
Occupational therapy	5	
Podiatry	1	
Human Science	1	
Exercise Physician (applied to Medicine)	1	
TOTAL	**30**	**19.4%**
Caring Professions:		
Community/Youth	5	
Social Work/Welfare	12	
Childcare	1	
Psychology	5	
Counselling	3	
TOTAL	**26**	**16.8%**
Management:		
Higher Education	1	
Construction	1	
Occupational Health & Safety	2	
Organisational Change	1	
Health	1	
Retail	1	
Management (not specified)	6	
TOTAL	**13**	**8.4%**
Public Servant:		
Australian Bureau of Statistics	1	
Food Science	1	

Management	2	
Disability	1	
Welfare	1	
Didn't specify	2	
TOTAL	**8**	**5.2%**
Research:		
Youth	1	
History	1	
TOTAL	**2**	**1.3%**
Other:		
Business/Finance/Insurance	**7**	**4.5%**
Solicitor/Paralegal	**3**	**2%**
Information/Technology	**3**	**2%**
Environmental Scientist & Environmental/Urban Planning	**3**	**2%**
Union Organiser	**1**	**0.6%**
Industrial relations	**1**	**0.6%**
Project Officer	**1**	**0.6%**
Engineering	**1**	**0.6%**
Veterinarian	**1**	**0.6%**
Immigration Agent	**1**	**0.6%**
Hospitality	**1**	**0.6%**
Journalist	**1**	**0.6%**
Pilot (RAAF)	**1**	**0.6%**
Seafarer	**1**	**0.6%**
Botanical Illustrator	**1**	**0.6%**
Didn't specify career	**3**	**2%**
TOTAL	**155**	**100%**

What is most significant about this data is the sheer diversity of career destinations. Any assumption that the majority of students follow teaching and nursing vocations was not borne out in this data. Only 46 respondents had improved their economic position by entering teaching or academic professions. Among these there was a range of levels from pre-school to tertiary including 6 who had specialised in teaching special needs students. Only 13 people had become nurses or midwives in this sample, but a number of former students had entered other health related fields such as occupational therapy, podiatry or, in some cases, medicine, bio-medical science or radiation therapy (see Table 8). The third most numerous group whose new occupations had improved their economic situation entered what I refer to as the "caring professions", including social or welfare workers, youth workers and 5 had become psychologists. Less numerous were people who had entered management (n=13) or public service positions (n=8). There were also 3 who had taken up the law as their profession and 7 who were in Business, Finance or Insurance related professions and had improved their economic position.

I also looked at professions where respondents declared they had not improved their economic position in order to ascertain the range of overall career paths pursued by these students:

Table 9: Careers not bringing increased income (or pre-existing job so wage unchanged)

Career	n=	Career	n=
Artist	2	Health worker	1
Library technician	1	Welfare worker	1
Financial planner	1	Medical contracts	1
Accounts Manager	1	Public Servant	2
Academic work	7	Film producer	1
Teacher/ESL	2	Environmental work	1
Clerical/Admin	2	Industrial design	1
Human Resources	2	Same job (not specified)	1
Youth worker	1	Casual worker (not specified)	1
Counselling	1	TAFE study	2
Mental health caseworker	1		
TOTAL			**33 (17.8%)**

These data also indicate it is not a simple matter of assuming tertiary studies improve people's economic outcomes. In the case of teaching, an additional 9 people (including 7 in academic teaching roles) did not improve their economic situation. Likewise, several who had gone into "caring" professions (n=5) had not improved their economic situation. Open Foundation had an impact on their life that was not just monetary. Interestingly, the number of respondents who either had or were completing a PhD was 13 or roughly 3.8% which indicates the potential for high levels of academic success of enabling students.

Former students were also asked whether they had made enduring friendships among peers in their Open Foundation cohort. 185 (54.4%) reported that they had while 155 (45.6%) reported they had not. Of the latter, a number were distance students so it would have been more difficult to sustain friendships. Further research on this aspect of the data may reveal its contribution to the resilience of enabling students and the contribution support networks make to successful outcomes.

Parts of the survey required qualitative responses. One such question asked why students had enrolled in Open Foundation. Unlike students completing their Higher School Certificate who enter University and might be presumed to be following a life course and having reached a level of education that gained them a sufficient ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) previously known as a UAI (University Admission Index) or simply TER (Tertiary Entrance Rank), the mature age students had a much more complex and varied set of reasons for enrolling. These were not quantified for this paper as some respondents gave a variety of reasons for enrolment. These have been analysed for patterns and themes in Table 10 (below). Some people were looking back over their lives to answer that question, others were looking at the stage of life they were now in, while others were looking to their futures. Their responses fell broadly into the following categories:

Table 10: Reasons for enrolling in Open Foundation

Right time	• Children now independent • Empty nest syndrome • Filling in time while children at school • Study fits in with other commitments • Had free time • Midlife crisis (now or never), stage of life, wanted change of life, re-evaluating life • Opportunity too good to miss at the time • Distance offering fit in with 5th pregnancy • Wife could support me while studying • "Procrastination seals your fate" • Business failure or sale meant need to retrain • Wanted to move ahead • Had lost job • Divorce, separation or failed relationship • Retired and free to study
Needed "ME" time	• Search for self identity, stimulation, escape (from partners with injury or disability confined at home) • Lacking confidence, felt useless • Self realisation I had the ability • For personal growth • Unhappy • Wanted an adventure • Bored • Isolated • Depressed • Stagnated • Needed a purpose for my life • A chance to reflect on what is important in life • To find a new direction • Wanted a better life • To broaden my horizons • Had not reached my potential • Wanted to move ahead
To prove I could do it	• To challenge or test own ability • To prove capability to others (even if those others were deceased), • Felt I could achieve, was confident in my abilities • Had not reached my potential • Thought I wasn't "smart" enough • Thought Uni was only for "bright" people
Specific career skills	• For future stability • Wanted convenient career to fit in with children • Seeking specific job • Seeking any job • Wanted career change • Wanted meaningful career • Seeking better job prospects or qualifications • As a "back-up" • Just seeking skills, generally • Felt a "calling" to a particular profession (eg teaching or mental health or social justice) • Wanted better pay or on low pay

	• Had "no choices" or frustration in previous job • Needed security of a career • I was "broke and going nowhere"
ATAR required	• Needed Uni entry • Needed "bridge" into Uni or too "rusty" for Undergrad studies • To nurture myself into Uni
The Dream	• Long held desire to further education was mentioned by many respondents
Regret	• Forced to leave school • Regrets not having opportunity to progress education • Had a negative school experience • Had a poor education • Had no early motivation to succeed in education • Family commitments prevented education
As therapy	• Recovering from agoraphobia • Referred by either a psychiatrist or psychologist • Generally therapeutic to restore sense of self
Death of loved one	• Death of parent, partner, close relative or baby
Companion	• To accompany a partner, child or friend who wished to do the course
Government obligation	• To meet Centrelink requirements for assistance • Wanted more than Government payments to live on
Influence of others	• Encouraged by workmates • Persuaded by boss to improve chances of promotion • Inspired by people who had completed OF
Family	• In order to provide for family • To have a job that would make my son proud of me • To be a role model for children or grandchildren • To meet family expectations
To gain knowledge	• Just for interest • So I could organise my thoughts • To re-engage in or "round out" education • As a "mental exercise" • Had "passion" for learning
No fees attached	• Attracted by idea that Of was not a fee paying course
Advertising	• Attracted by the slogan "Change your life today"
Injury or disability	• Diagnosis and coming to terms with new condition • Near death experience
To give back to community	• Following an accident
Divine intervention	• A "GOD" incidence

The larger project will explore this complexity in more detail. But to illustrate the multifarious motivations of the mature age student, one male respondent gave a variety of reasons for enrolling:

Initially [I enrolled] to round out my education. A secondary goal was to determine if I could study effectively at this level. Education in my early life in the UK was very poor and I left school at 15 years. It was also stage of life issues: separation and divorce at 50; being made redundant at 53; and early retirement at 55.

Another student, a female:

> I wanted to prove I had a brain and could train in something to take me through to
> retirement that interested me and gave my life a purpose. I was also nearing the end
> of a 27 year marriage, children grown up and I needed to fill a void.

These quotes and Table 10 suggest that for some students the turmoil in their lives, stage of life, and poor early educational experiences make the decision to enrol a risky enterprise. Some responses to this question were sad, others jubilant, but all told a story about a journey that was inspirational, even if it seemed mundane to them.

Overall, this data revealed the complexity of these students' lives. Further analysis of this data will provide details of their educational aspirations and the problems they bring with them that are not immediately visible. They are often engaged in a process referred to by Baxter and Britton (2001) as "remaking" themselves. As educators, the more this process is understood, the better we can assist that transformation.

References

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